STREET SPIRIT

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Simone Rotmant

Volunteers paint one of the tiny homes that makes up YSA's Youth Empowerment Village.

Long-awaited Tiny House Village for homeless youth set to open in Oakland

By Simone Rotman

THE once empty lot at 633 Hegenberger Road has come alive: Fruit trees and flowers spring out of brightly colored planter boxes, expressive murals cover practically every surface, and volunteers come each weekend (rain or shine) to help bring the vision of a village for homeless youth into reality. After more than three years in the making and COVID-19 related delays, the Youth Spirit Artworks Tiny House Youth Empowerment Village will finally open mid-February!

The seeds of the Tiny House Village (THV) idea were planted three years ago. At that time, Sean McCreary was a sophomore in high school and a Leader at Youth Spirit Artworks (YSA), a role with the highest level of responsibility in the YSA program. (Disclaimer: YSA is the publisher of *Street Spirit*.) McCreary and a group of other YSA youth envisioned building a communal living space to house and empower homeless young people. McCreary has been involved in the process from its very beginning until today.

"The soul of the tiny house project came from the affordable housing work YSA was already doing," McCreary said. Before starting the Tiny House project, YSA was advocating for affordable housing and cultivating community through art. They advocated for renters' rights and rent control at city council meetings, led collaborative mural projects in Berkeley, and functioned as a day shelter for local homeless youth.

> *'Most people see low-income housing as dreary and stale, but this is an active engagement of community and art and being in the world'*

Youth from a local shelter who were spending time at YSA's day program frequently mentioned that they were unable to find placement in permanent housing because of the lack of affordable housing in the Bay Area, and struggled to earn enough money to pay rent. It was from this challenge that YSA youth leaders began developing the idea of a tiny house village for homeless youth.

McCreary was initially both excited and skeptical to commit to the tiny house idea because YSA had never done a project of this scale before. "If I was going to be a part of this, I wanted to see it all the way through. But I had to feel secure we had the organizational bandwidth. I was one of the people playing devil's advocate," recalls McCreary. He began believing when he saw the first tiny house prototype, built by the contractor Tre Brown, in YSA's outdoor art lot.

YSA had originally hoped to build the Empowerment Village in Berkeley to be closer to their studio on Alcatraz Avenue, but faced pushback from the neighboring community. After many months of advocacy and relationship-building with Oakland officials, in 2019, the City of Oakland granted YSA the 633 Hegenberger site where the village is located today.

A portion of the funding for the

***THV** continues on page 7*

Shelter-in-Place hotels in Alameda County are closing. Where will residents go?

By Thomas Brouns

FOR nearly a year the COVID-19 pandemic has confined Californians to their homes. For homeless people, this has not been an option. Since April 2020, California's response to this has been Project Roomkey, a state initiative to temporarily house homeless people with COVID-19, or those who are at higher risk of contracting the disease, in vacant hotel and motel rooms.

Since then, thousands of unsheltered people across the state have moved into these rooms. For some, this was the first time they consistently had a roof over their head in years. But because funding for Project Roomkey expired on December 31, counties across the state are working to transition people into more permanent solutions rather than sending them back out to the streets.

Alameda County has set an ambitious goal: To offer all the unhoused people who participated in the emergency shelter program permanent, non-congregate housing. Kerry Abbott, the Director of the Office of Homeless Care and Coordination, a part of Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, explained that a patchwork of funding has allowed the county to continue providing support to unhoused people still in need.

"We are decreasing occupancy and had been planning to transition down the hotels. But when we close a hotel, we either offer housing or we will transfer them to another non-congregate site," Abbott explained.

According to Abott, of the 1,425 people who have participated in the Roomkey program in Alameda County since April, 594 have departed and 889 remain. Of those who have exited the program, 316 have been placed in subsidized housing while the others have opted to return to the streets, entered a rehabilitation program, or transferred to a different shelter.

In early 2019, over 8,000 people in Alameda County were experiencing homelessness, according to the Alameda County Point-in-Time count–a 42 percent increase from 2017. However, many homeless advocates say this is a vast undercount, and estimate that there may be as many as twice that number today as a result of COVID-19 and its economic toll. (Alameda County did not conduct a Point-in-Time count in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.)

Under Project Roomkey, the county has contracted with local motels to designate two specific projects: Operation Safer Ground and Operation Comfort.

Operation Safer Ground provides temporary shelter to people over age 65 or with pre-existing conditions that make them vulnerable. (Operation Safer Ground is no longer accepting new referrals.)

Operation Comfort provides motel rooms to peo-

***Hotels** continues on page 8*



Adamu Chan

Cal students and community members tear down a fence that UC Berkeley had erected at People's Park ahead of their plan to build housing there next year.

The fight to save People's Park gains new momentum

By Alastair Boone

ON Friday January 29, a group of UC Berkeley students joined forces with the People's Park Committee to hold a rally at the park to protest the housing UC Berkeley plans to build there. The rally, which was initially an open mic, culminated in an unexpected action: A group of 100-some students and community members tore down the fencing that had recently been erected at the park so that the University could sample the soil before beginning construction. The *late-January protest felt like something straight out of 1969*—the year that people reclaimed the empty lot at Telegraph Avenue and Dwight Way and planted a park through grassroots organizing and direct action.

As students filed into the park on the sunny Friday afternoon, Lisa Teague—a member of the People's Park Committee—said she was pleased with the turnout.

"We were hoping for a good turnout but then people just kept coming, so we set up our speakers and microphones and had kind of an open mic," said Teague. Students gave speeches, calling attention to how the University's relationship to the park is at odds with its radical legacy. Residents of the park and community members spoke as well, followed by Michael Delacour, one of the lead organizers to reclaim the park 52 years ago."What are we trying to do, take down this fence?" Michael Delacour, 83, asked the crowd. He was met with cheers. "Looking at the fence, we have the numbers here," he said. "You guys can decide what to do."

In an instant, students started tearing down the fencing.

"It was an oddly coordinated spontaneous moment, because some people started saying 'where do we take the fence?' and someone said, 'to Carol Christ's house!' and someone else said, 'No! We take it to Sproul!'" Just like that, students picked up each piece of fencing that had been torn to the ground and marching them down Telegraph Avenue, chanting, "Whose Park? Our Park!"

The fencing was left at the doorstep of Sproul Hall—UC Berkeley's main administrative building—with a sign that said "Students for People's Park" on top of it.

Teague says there has been no discernable police presence or response so far, though they are wary that something may take place in the coming days. "They have, you know, almost 52 years of responding, so we're kind of on high alert," they said.

The late-January protest marks an uptick in student engagement at People's Park. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, students have been more involved with the park—and the effort to thwart the impending housing project, which is set to break ground in 2022. Residents of Cloyne Court and Casa Zimbabwe—two UC *Berkeley co-ops—have started regularly cooking meals that are distributed at the park.* And a growing number of students are attending the People's Park Committee's weekly Zoom meetings.

"I think is an amazing thing. Because that's what will save us, honestly. A robust student-led movement," Teague said. "[The University] is more accountable to the students than to the People's Park Committee."

If you would like to join the People's Park Committee's weekly Zoom calls, check their social media channels on Sunday mornings to find the link. Meetings take place every Sunday at 1:00 p.m.

If you would like to sign up to receive text alerts about the fight to save People's Park,

text "SAVE THE PARK" to 74121.

Alastair Boone is the Editor in Chief of Street Spirit.



Lisa Teague

Pieces of the fence that protestors marched from People's Park to Sproul Hall.





Adamu Chan

Top: A sign at the park reads, "flowers are the root of all good" Bottom: Pieces of the fence lay on the ground at the park before protestors marched them to the UC Berkeley campus

The COVID-19 vaccine for the homeless community: What you need to know

By Alastair Boone

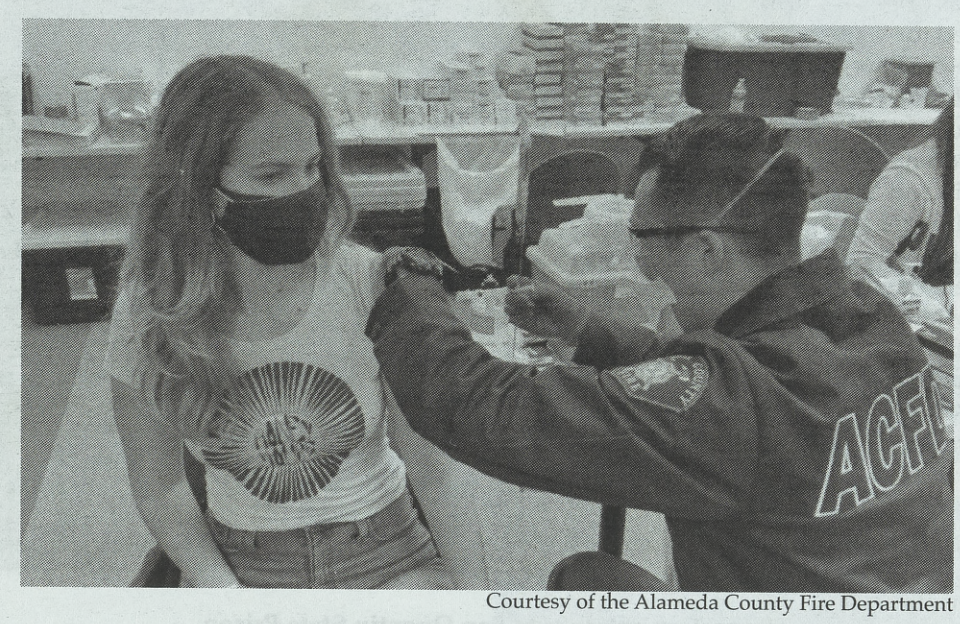
While public health officials have not yet announced when unhoused people will receive the coronavirus vaccine, they have indicated that those who live in homeless shelters will be able to receive the vaccine soon. And with immunization right around the corner, many unhoused people have questions and concerns about the vaccine.

"Oh no, I'm scared of that," said *Street Spirit* vendor Joanne Knott. "I gotta wait till I see other people take it. I've been hearing bad things. I just don't feel comfortable with it right now."

At the time of publication, Alameda County had vaccinated over 102,000 healthcare workers as well as people over the age of 65. If you are over the age of 65 or are a healthcare worker, you are currently eligible to become vaccinated—regardless of your housing status. Vaccines should always be free, even if you are asked to provide your insurance information. For information about how to make an appointment, visit: https://covid-19.acgov.org/vaccines.

Street Spirit is closely following the vaccine rollout. We will publish the information about when and where homeless people can get vaccinated as soon as it becomes available. In the meantime, here's some information to answer your questions about the COVID-19 vaccine.

If you still have concerns about receiving the vaccine after reading, you can email **COVIDACHCH@acgov.org** and an employee of Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless (ACHCH) will answer your questions. At this time, ACHCH employees will not be able to answer questions about when or where you can get the vaccine, but all other queries are welcome. (The following information comes from Alameda County's "Vaccine FAQ.")



Courtesy of the Alameda County Fire Department

***Street Spirit* Editor Alastair Boone gets her COVID-19 vaccine.**

Are COVID-19 vaccines safe?

Yes. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted Emergency Use Authorizations (EUA) for two COVID-19 vaccines that have been shown to be safe and effective, as determined by data from the manufacturers and findings from large clinical trials. These data demonstrate that the known and potential benefits of both vaccines outweigh the known and potential harms of becoming infected with the coronavirus.

How will a COVID-19 vaccine impact the pandemic?

A COVID-19 vaccine could: Reduce number of people with COVID-19, reduce severity of illness, reduce hospitalizations, and reduce deaths.

Which vaccines are available to prevent COVID-19?

There are two vaccines currently available: one from Moderna and one from Pfizer. Both have shown to be 94-95 percent effective and both require two doses, given about three weeks apart. Based on currently available data, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and California Department of Public Health advises that both doses are required for complete protection.

What are possible side effects from the vaccine?

Some people have experienced side effects after getting the COVID-19 vaccine, like temporary pain or swelling on the arm where they got the shot, and fever, chills, tiredness, or headache throughout the rest of your body. Such side effects are normal for any vaccine and should be expected as the body builds cells to defend against COVID-19.

How do COVID-19 vaccines work?

Being vaccinated against COVID-19 helps the body develop a memory response to fight off the virus that causes COVID-19, without having to get the illness. COVID-19 vaccines also decrease the likelihood of severe illness or death if infection does occur. For more information, see Understanding How COVID-19 Vaccines Work (CDC).

How is the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines monitored in the U.S.?

The U.S. vaccine safety system ensures that vaccines are as safe as possible. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has determined that the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective based on large clinical trials with diverse participants.

What systems are in place to monitor for side effects in real time?

There are systems in place to monitor for adverse events and side effects of the vaccine in real time, including:

V-safe app from the CDC is a smartphone-based, after-vaccination health checker for people who have received the COVID-19 vaccine. V-safe uses text messaging and surveys to check in with COVID-19 vaccine recipients after vaccination. Simply put, anyone with symptoms enters their information into V-Safe so that researchers can continue to study the safety of the vaccine on all populations.

The Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) is a national system used by the CDC and the FDA. This system collects reports from healthcare professionals, vaccine manufacturers, and the public regarding any adverse events that may happen after vaccination.

National Healthcare Safety Network (NHSN) is an acute and long-term facility monitoring system that reports to the Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS).

Vaccine Safety Datalink (VSD) is a network of nine healthcare organizations from across the U.S. that conduct active surveillance and research. This system is used to aid in determining if possible side effects identified in the VAERS are actually related to the vaccine.

Clinical Immunization Safety Assessment (CISA) Project is a collaboration between seven medical research institutions and the CDC. CISA provides consultation on a case-by-case basis, and conducts research about vaccine safety.

How well does the vaccine protect me from COVID-19?

The Pfizer vaccine and the Moderna vaccine have shown to be 94-95% effective. For complete protection, both vaccines require two doses, given about three weeks apart.

How long does immunity last after being vaccinated?

It is not yet known how long immunity will last after vaccination. We will have more knowledge about how long immunity lasts once we have more data on how well the COVID-19 vaccine works in real-world conditions. Experts are working hard to learn more about how long vaccine-induced immunity will last, and we will update the public once we have more information.

Alastair Boone is the Editor in Chief of Street Spirit.

There was...

By Claire J. Baker

a mountain of ice
in front of us
a pestilence behind

on our right a firestorm
burning on our cheeks
on the left a flood

relentlessly rising:
there was no way to go
but up.

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JC Orton
Vendor Coordinator

Alastair Boone
Editor in Chief

Inti Gonzalez
YSA Street Spirit Leader

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Do you have a tip, or feedback about the paper? Please email us at streetspiritnews@gmail.com

Inside the struggle to depopulate San Quentin

By Joe Garcia

ON Monday, December 14, the same day that Americans first began receiving COVID-19 vaccinations, dozens of San Quentin (SQ) prisoners lumbered onto buses, their ankles and wrists in shackles, as they were involuntarily relocated to other state prisons.

Frustration and anxiety continued to simmer within SQ's COVID-impacted community, as prison officials attempt to solve dangerous overcrowding in hindsight. Alongside fears of infection and death, prisoners now brace themselves for quick displacement. Questions swirl and remain unchecked.

"When they forced me to leave Chino and come here, they told us we'd be able to decide where we wanted to go next," said Mike, a 71-year-old man who had been among the 125 people hastily shipped to San Quentin from the California Institute for Men (CIM) last May. "That was just another one of their lies."

That group of emergency transfers from CIM to SQ was originally intended to prevent those prisoners from succumbing to COVID-19, but instead it brought the coronavirus to San Quentin and triggered the still-ongoing massive outbreak.

Mike has remained COVID-free while living in both institutions, but as someone who suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), he's deathly afraid of becoming infected. He's glad to be in a single cell.

"I don't leave the cell unless I have to—only to shower, and only when it's not crowded," he said, adding that he doesn't even go to the Yard.

Mike said he had been told that California State Prison-Corcoran was safer because the cell doors were solid metal. At San Quentin, cells had open bars. "I wish they'd just leave me alone and quit moving me around," he said.

Mike did not participate in any of the habeas corpus lawsuits filed by San Quentin prisoners against the unsafe COVID-19 living conditions, but his forced transfer stems from it just the same. The state court recently ordered SQ to reduce its population from roughly 3,000 prisoners down to 1,775.

Over the last several months, SQ has gradually been rehousing its prisoners to accommodate only one person per cell—a stark contrast to the decades of overcrowding and double occupancy.

Most of the December 14 batch of prisoners being shipped out of San Quentin had never tested positive for COVID-19 and have underlying health conditions which the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) classified as "high-risk medical."

CDCR had mandated that "high-risk medical" prisoners be moved out, and hundreds more transfers were set to take place. Many San Quentin residents were told they'd be next. Some had already been separated from their personal property and held in quarantine in preparation for another round of bus rides.

"Last year, they told me SQ was the best place to get treatment for my HIV," said Victor S., a 39-year-old first-time offender who had never tested positive for COVID-19. "Now my counselor says I'm too high-risk to stay."

Victor said the prison had given him the option to refuse a transfer at first, but they changed their mind a few days later.

On December 16, however, these transfers were abruptly canceled. Prisoners who relinquished

San Quentin continues on page 6



Jonathan Chiu

The eastern entrance to San Quentin State Prison.

With help from the unhoused community, two tiny homes get a facelift

By Thomas Brouns

THANKS to supplies donated by The Village in Oakland and the hard work of a group of volunteers, two unhoused families' tiny homes became a bit less tiny.

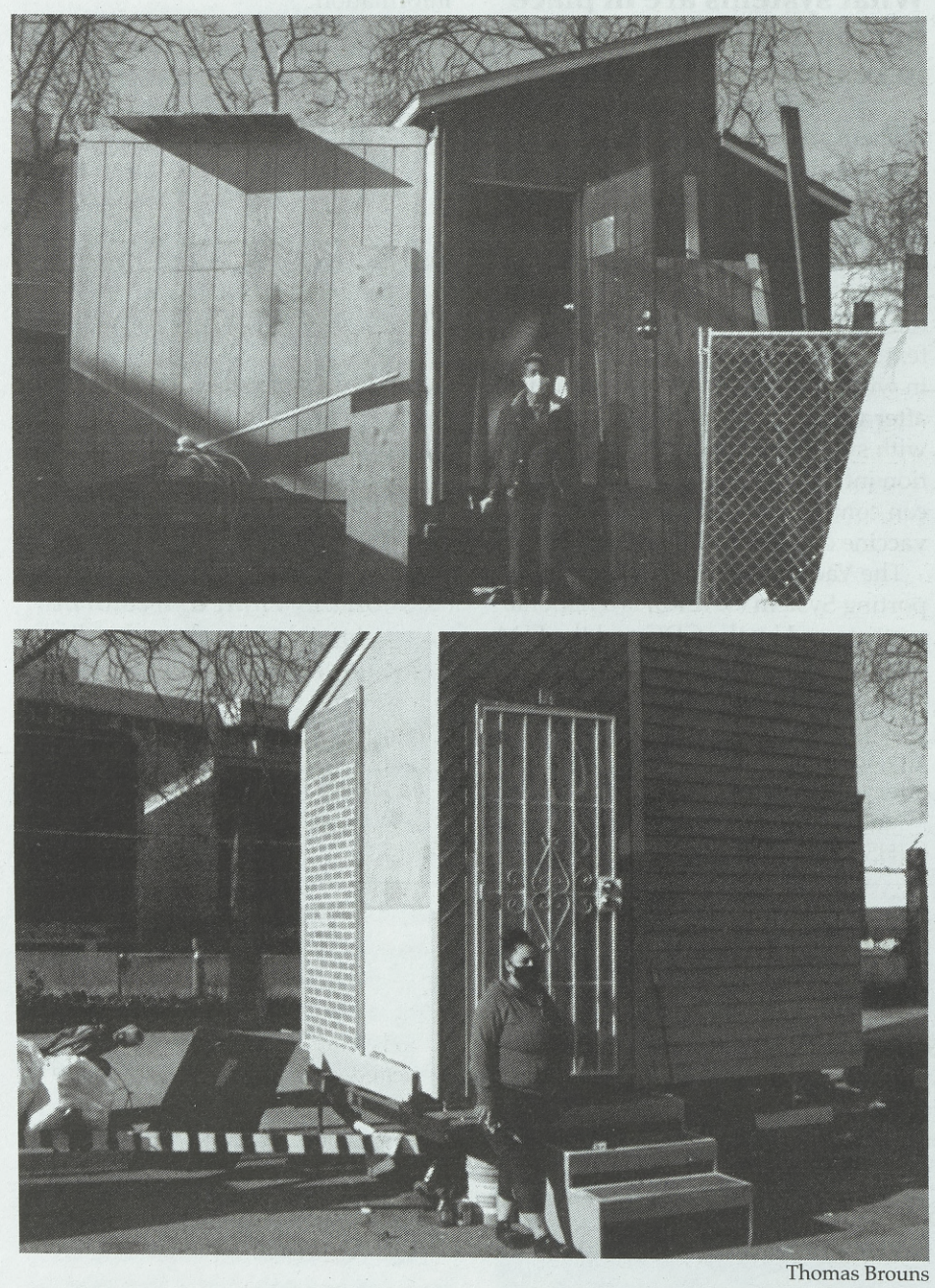
On January 23 and 24, members of the unhoused community and a handful of passersby from nearby businesses joined forces to expand the size of two trailer-mounted tiny homes by about 50 percent each. The families living in those homes had been temporarily staying in a hotel under The Village's "hotels not graves" program, an emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness, who are often at a higher risk of exposure to the coronavirus. To facilitate the expansion project, the trailer-mounted tiny homes were towed from their usual locations in Oakland to a work site on the corner of 7th and Peralta in West Oakland.

Markaya Spikes provided an overview of the improvements being made to her home and that of Vanessa Trinidad. By expanding the living space onto the front part of the trailer chassis, she was able to expand the living and storage space for herself and her daughter, as well as upgrade the home's bathroom.

Ideas on how to modify the living space and make it more functional came from living in the tiny home more than a year and a half. "Also just basically taking our ideas from what you see from people being normally housed, and transferring it to a tiny house," Spikes added.

The volunteers who worked on the expansion were provided lunch and beverages by The Village. Needa Bee, founder of The Village, was handing out hot dogs, coffee, and pizza, which attracted a handful of passersby and local business owners. She cheerfully offered food to them as well, but artfully persuaded them to contribute a few hours of work to the expansion project in return.

This is just one of the ways affordable housing is built in Oakland. Bureaucratic wheels turn slowly, and unsheltered people house each other in the interim.



Thomas Brouns

Top: Markaya Spikes stands next to her home. To her left, the new portion added by volunteers can be seen. Bottom: Trinidad stands in front of her newly renovated tiny home.

Thomas Brouns is a documentary filmmaker and student at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. He has served four overseas tours as an American diplomat and is a retired U.S. Army officer.

COVID-19 in the homeless community: In Dialogue with Dr. Harrison Alter

By Alastair Boone

AT the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, it seemed a given that the virus would ravage the homeless community, which is especially vulnerable to death and illness. However, the number of COVID-19 cases amongst unhoused people in Alameda County has been consistently lower than that of the population as a whole. Of the 5,285 tests Alameda County has given to unhoused people on the street and in shelters since the onset of the pandemic, the positivity rate is 2.2 percent. (This number excludes the COVID-positive people living in isolation hotels.) That's compared to 5 percent in the county as a whole since the start of the pandemic.



The reason behind this low percentage positive rate is hard to pinpoint. Some have speculated that it is in part because many homeless people live outside, which makes it easier for carriers to avoid spreading the virus. Additionally, shelters have cut capacity considerably, and taken on new safety measures to prevent viral spread.

It could also be thanks to a contingent of Alameda County employees who have been working tirelessly to keep COVID-19 cases low amongst unhoused people. Since the outset of the pandemic, Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless (ACHCH) has been laser focused on containing viral spread on the street. They orchestrated Operation Comfort, a program that places homeless people who have been exposed to COVID-19 in motels, as well as Operation Safer Ground, through which unhoused people in at-risk groups can also get motel rooms. Additionally, ACHCH has done extensive coronavirus testing in encampment settings. They have also done considerable street outreach, occasionally working to help COVID-positive homeless people shelter where they are when they are not able or willing to move into a motel.

Since June, Dr. Harrison Alter has been at the helm of the County's response. Having spent much of his career studying Social Emergency Medicine, which he describes as "an emerging field that incorporates social context, such as housing, food, safety and more, into the structure and practice of emergency care," he easily fit into the role of interim Medical Director for ACHCH. However, he had been ready to retire—until the coronavirus pandemic hit the Bay Area last Spring.

"I just felt like a pandemic wasn't a very good time to be on sabbatical," he told *Street Spirit*.

Instead of retiring, he got in touch with some friends of his who work for Alameda County to ask if they needed any help. That happened to be the very day that Governor Gavin Newsom signed onto Project Roomkey. He ended up helping develop the policies and procedures that would be used to roll out the project, and was eventually hired on in the interim Medical Director role, where he served for six months before retiring in January.

We caught up with Dr. Alter to discuss COVID-19 in the homeless community and the county's strategy for containing it. Our conversation has been edited and condensed.

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Alastair Boone: Broadly, why hasn't there been more COVID-19 in the homeless community? What have the most successful strategies been in preventing viral spread on the street?

Dr. Alter: The truth is we don't really know what the magic sauce is but we know what some of the components of it are—we just don't know whether each one of these components is a teaspoon or a cup. Some of the components are, number one, people are very careful. People who know that they are vulnerable to this disease, who have seen a lot of disease and death depending on how long they've been on the street, and they don't want to get it. So they're careful. They're receptive to messages about safe physical distancing and careful hand and surface hygiene to the extent that they're able to do that. And mask wearing, which is a little bit harder but which people do. So being careful is important.

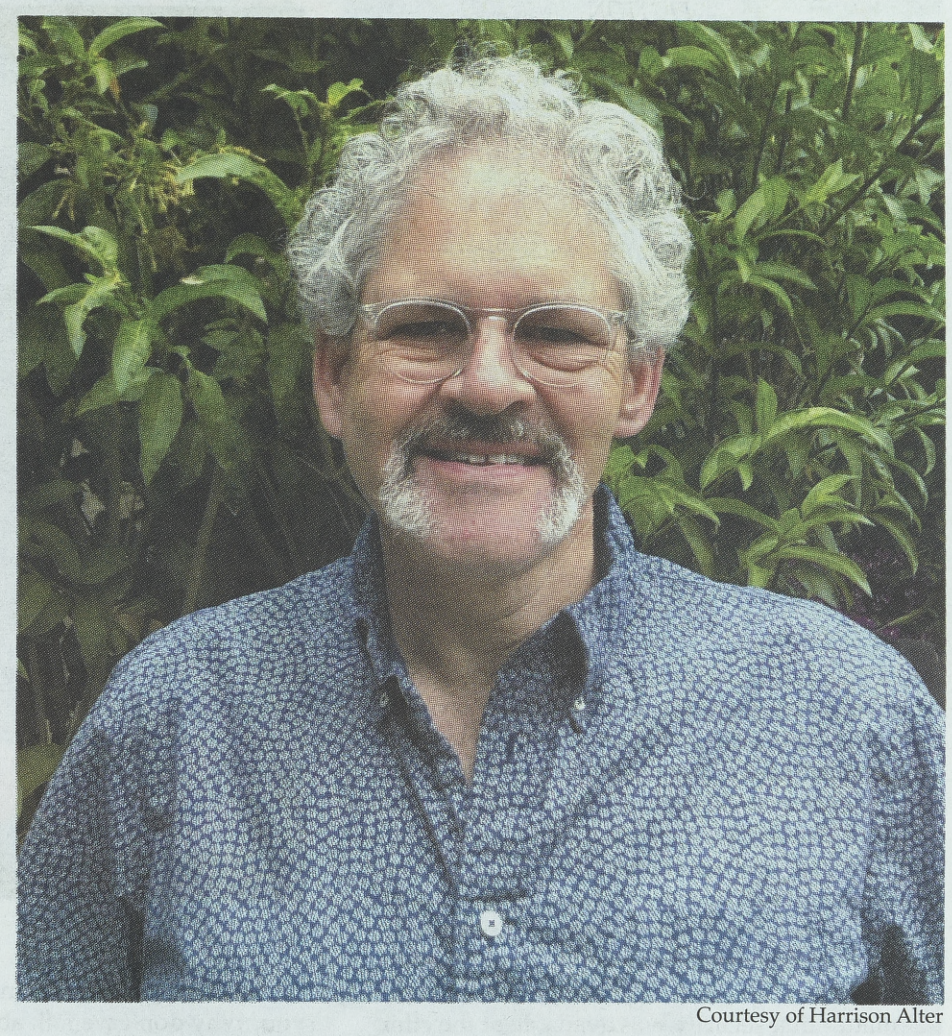
I think that decompressing the shelters helped shelter-dwelling people experiencing homelessness maintain [safety in] those environments. The shelter operators have gotten extremely sophisticated about disease containment. And you know, out on the streets, the street teams have been providing support and education and have been available for questions and concerns that people have about the pandemic. And they've all been a crackerjack team in terms of staying current on the best guidance, and being creative with messaging.

> *'People who know that they're vulnerable to this disease, who have seen a lot of disease and death, they don't want to get it. So they're careful'*

Then I have to say that I think our testing strategy is helping. We do a combination of response-related testing and community care testing. And I think the balance of those two strategies has provided our homeless community in Alameda County with a pretty comprehensive approach to testing.

AB: Tell me more about the street outreach component of the county's response. What happens on a weekly basis when it comes to street outreach and testing?

Dr. A: When we get somebody with symptoms or who's tested [positive], we refer them to Operation Comfort [the program in which the county places COVID-positive homeless people in motels]. That referral triggers an investigation within Alameda County Healthcare for the Homeless to see whether that person is coming from an environment at risk. That process *is actually fairly detailed, but repro*ducible.



Courtesy of Harrison Alter

From June to January, Dr. Alter was at the helm of the County's response to COVID-19 in the homeless community.

So Operation Comfort, in addition to being an isolation and quarantine environment, is an early warning system. When somebody goes to Operation Comfort we try to backtrack to find out where they came from, to assess whether we need to go in and do testing or go in and just quarantine people, or support them in quarantine, or bring them to Operation Comfort if they're willing, or [determine] whether we can contain it on site [and] work with the people in that encampment or that shelter to contain the exposures. This sometimes requires extra support, meals, extra hygiene supplies. So all those actions are sort of triggered by a referral to Operation Comfort. And then one of our street teams will go in and do widespread testing in that environment in response to that case.

AB: So that's where the percentage positive numbers come from in the homeless community?

Dr. A: Well that number is a combination of the response testing and the community care testing.

AB: And that's widespread testing in environments where you aren't already aware there's an infection?

Dr. A: Exactly. For weeks back in the early part of the pandemic we went to [the encampment on] High Street [in East Oakland]. We were a regular presence on Tuesday afternoon at High Street, and people just knew that if they wanted to get tested they could come on Tuesday afternoon. Now we have a similar thing at St. Vincent de Paul, in the courtyard. [So] if people want to get tested that's where they should go.

AB: Is that fairly popular?

Dr. A: [Yes.] I mean there are days that we do, you know, more than 50 tests at those settings.

AB: There's a lot of discourse right now about shelters being less safe than encampments when it comes to COVID-19 because of the congregate element. What do you think—are *shelters are in fact less safe of a housing option during the pandemic?*

Dr. A: I would never want to advocate that somebody who didn't want to be living on the street and who wanted to live under a roof wouldn't have that option. I think we're taking great care in shelter environments at the moment to contain the disease. We're working with them on their ventilation systems, we walk through with them to review their safety practices and how they move people from one place to another, and they're all very eager to get it right. I think that their clients are the same way and so, it's been a sort of unfortunate restriction in the shelter population because shelters can't accommodate everybody that they used to, but it has meant that people who don't want to be on the street aren't stuck there.

AB: Once homeless people become vaccinated, what will that mean about how life can change?

Dr. A: Here's what it means. For the individual person, it means that the risk is much, much lower of needing to go to the hospital with COVID-19, or needing to go to the ICU with COVID-19, or dying of COVID-19. It means that the pandemic will be shorter, and that we can get back to not being completely consumed by keeping people safe from the virus.

What it won't mean is a near-term end to [wearing masks] and safe physical distancing and careful hand and surface hygiene. Because until we understand the vaccine better and what it means for contagiousness or transmission of the virus, we can't let back on any of that stuff. So that's kind of a hard pill for people to swallow, because they're done with this already. They want to gather with

In Dialogue *continues on page 11*

What if I told you I can change reality right in front of you?

FICTION

By Jack Bragen

Notes: Dr. Bridget Nelson, PhD
Patient: Frederick Walford
Date and Time: 7/31/2025 4:45-5:30 P.M.
The subject continues to suffer from multiple delusional thoughts. He has separated from his wife of nine years. His condition is worsening despite best efforts of staff. He is close to candidacy for restrictive living in our inpatient zone. We anticipate it will be difficult to obtain his cooperation, and he may have to be transitioned by force. I have messaged security to be on standby during psychotherapy sessions...

#

Dr. Nelson takes a hand mirror from the drawer of the massive, mahogany desk. She combs her hair and notices a few strands of premature gray. She puts on a subtle amount of lipstick and a few dabs of makeup. She wonders, in the back of her mind, why she wants to fix up her appearance for this person; he is thirty-nine, nerdy, unattractive, short, fat, and balding—and not especially intelligent. Additionally, mentally, he is extremely sick. Why, then?

Dr. Nelson looks to the right and left—it is compulsive. She has a mental map of escape routes should one of her clients come after her. It would not matter that security was available at the clinic if the security person couldn't get to her aid fast enough.

She is jolted by the door buzzer. She puts the hand mirror away and checks the collar on her shirt. She buzzes in Mr. Walford. Walford walks in and sits in the cushiony chair across from Dr. Nelson. Then he begins his monologue—he often reverted to that, and it was borderline gibberish—highly annoying to Dr. Nelson.

#

"...I'd made the discovery while I was in the bathtub. I hate to say it, but I have a rubber duck. I know that I am thirty-nine years old and all, and that someone my age should not have a rubber duck, and, really, it is none of anyone's business; but I am forced by the circumstances to be totally honest with you." Fred pauses, and Dr. Nelson scribbles a note on her yellow sheet of paper. "To begin with, my wife had left me six months prior."

"And what emotions did that bring up?"

"You can very well guess."

"No. I do not guess. How did you feel when your wife left you?"

"I thought we were talking about my discovery."



Inti Gonzalez / intigonzalez.com

"You said it was relevant that your wife had left you. Why don't we talk about that?"

"But I discovered something about reality."

"You have told me about this several times before. I need to tell you that the thing you believe you have discovered is an illusion brought about by your reactive psychosis."

"But what if I can demonstrate my power?"

"Mr. Walford, we don't have to go there. You should take my word for it that your belief is an abnormality."

"What if I can change reality right in front of you?" Fred's mannerisms seem odd to Dr. Nelson and this worries her.

"Fred, you need to stop." Dr. Nelson says, with emphasis: "You need to listen to me."

Fred is sitting very straight, and Doctor Nelson struggles to keep calm. Her finger is hovering near the hidden panic button.

Fred says, "I am about to cause the door to this office to open, and a gentleman whom I have never seen, a very big man wearing a white lab coat, and with a birth mark on his forehead, will step through." Fred starts to wave his arms and has shoulder movements. "These movements help me propel the energy into the ether."

Dr. Nelson has had enough, and she presses the button. In a moment, a tall, burly psychiatric technician opens the door, and enters the room. He is wearing a white lab coat, and he has a birthmark on his forehead.

Fred says, "As you can see, my control of reality worked."

"Restrain him!" Dr. Nelson says.

Dr. Nelson is preparing a needle with tranquilizer. Meanwhile, Fred is focusing on another reality change.

Fred says: "I am causing the security man to immediately become ill and I am causing you to get an urgent call from a family member. Hospitalizing me is inappropriate."

The security man groans and clutches at his abdomen, giving Fred the opportunity to get free of a judo hold. Dr. Nelson's phone rings, and the call is from her daughter who reports that daddy has a girlfriend.

Dr. Nelson leaves the office, immediately, in tears, the security man groaning in pain on the floor, and Fred goes home. From there leaves a message for the clinic that he will get his treatment elsewhere.

Jack Bragen is a writer who lives in Martinez with his wife, Joanna. His books are available for purchase on Amazon.

'Transferring us around isn't going to fix the problem'

***San** Quentin from page 4*

their packed property had it returned to them, and counselors told everyone all transfers were off.

Travis Vales, a 28-year-old plaintiff in the Marin County class action lawsuit against San Quentin, petitioned the courts for one specific type of habeas corpus relief—consideration for early release from the remaining five years of his sentence rather than be transferred to a different prison.

"Transferring us around isn't going to fix the problem," he said. "We can't create the virus from inside. Officers and outside staff bring it into the facility, and then they tell us to wear masks for our protection. Nothing's changed."

On December 23, the California Supreme Court vacated the decision to reduce SQ's population to 1,775 and tossed the matter back into the hands of the Appellate Court.

As 2020 ends and the New Year begins, positive COVID-19 test results continue popping up inside San Quentin, as quarantine orders rotate around through various units.

The prison community remains fearful, angry, and grossly uncertain of what will happen next.

This story was originally published in Prison Journalism Project. Joe Garcia is the chairperson of the Journalism Guild at San Quentin News, the nation's only prison newspaper run by the incarcerated.

The color of a rainbow

By Isabel Gallegos

You see a rainbow in the sky after it rain outside of your house. The first color you see in rainbow it is red like a fire car for a fire on a house. Second color you see is orange like the orange you eat for food in your life. Also color yellow like a banana you can eat in your life. Third color is green like plant in your life. Fourth color is blue also like the sky with cloud around it makes you happy. Fifth color is purple like a snake in a forest moving around the place. Overall that is the rainbow in your life today.



Simone Rotman

YSA's Youth Empowerment Village is adorned with murals from local artists—many of them youth of color, ages 16-25.

East Bay housing for homeless youth set to open in February

THV from page 1

Tiny House Village came from in-kind donations on YSA's GoFundMe page. Even though the fundraiser reached its goal, people are still donating to this day. The rest of the funding for the Empowerment Village came from the cities of Berkeley and Oakland, as well as from members of the inter-faith community.

Now that the Empowerment Village is nearly complete, you will find beauty in any direction you look: From the vibrant fence murals surrounding the village to the budding fruit trees. YSA's director Sally Hindman usually sits by the front gate and welcomes the volunteers who come to help build each weekend. Approximately 2,000 volunteers have been involved over the years according to YSA's website.

The Youth Empowerment Village is an explosion of bright colors and artistic expression. Each mural is unique; some convey direct social messages while others are more abstract. "The art makes it more of a community space," shares Eli Streiff, the YSA youth leader who helped direct the artistic elements of the village. "Most people see low-income housing as dreary and stale, but this is an active engagement of community and art and being in the world."

Each 8′ x 10′ house features murals on its exterior walls and includes a Murphy bed, small desk and storage space. The village has communal bathrooms and showers, a kitchen yurt, and a yurt for gathering and creating art.

Most of the mural artists are under the age of 25 and people of color. Around half of the artists had never painted a mural before. "We're giving young local artists a platform to get exposure and potential gigs, and to be seen and appreciated," explains Streiff.

The fence surrounding the village is a combination of planks individually painted by members of the inter-faith community and large graffiti murals painted by youth graffiti artists. "We wanted to get people representative of the Bay Area involved: Churches and congregations as well as these young graffiti artists. The real energy and visual landscape of homelessless is graffiti," shares Streiff, "so we wanted to give these young artists an opportunity to participate. The goal is to encourage people to foster relationships with art and grow it in ways that will make their neighbors smile."

This commitment to the artistic aesthetic of the Tiny House Village is central to the kind of feeling YSA intends to build when residents start moving in: The Empowerment Village endeavors to be a space where residents can express themselves and create the kind of home they want to live in.

"Creating community is like creating family," says Dani Longo, who will be the site manager at the THV. "Not everyone will get along, but we're going to have the tools to meet challenges head on, resolve them in a communal way, and grow."

The communal structure of the Empowerment Village will give each member responsibility in maintaining the shared space. Everyone will have chores, like cooking meals, and attending community meetings. Committees will run different aspects of the village such as gardening and cleaning.

Longo believes the garden will play a large role in connecting people. Many of the plants in the garden are edible, such as fruits and veggies. "We'll bring the food we grew right here into the kitchen and together make dinner and eat it and be proud of it," she says, "We're going to learn more peaceful interactions through gardening."

Residents and staff will emphasize trauma-informed community care—a method of community building that focuses on understanding different coping mechanisms and communication methods of those who may have experienced trauma. The group will work on building empathy and compassionate communication.

The THV will function as transitional housing. Residents are allowed to stay in the Empowerment Village for two years, but can move out earlier. The program will be a launching pad for life after living there.

"The goal is to get the resident folks employed and in permanent housing," says Jilly de la Torre, YSA's Tiny House Project Coordinator. "If for some reason our efforts to find them permanent housing don't work out, they would probably go to another transitional housing program, but we would try to avoid this." Each resident will work with a case manager to connect to healthcare and an income which will eventually allow them to move into subsidized housing or afford their own place.



Simone Rotman

A volunteer paints one of the tiny homes at the Empowerment Village.

The youth will also work closely with the existing YSA leadership program. Similar to current youth leaders, Empowerment Village residents will fulfill YSA work hours and earn wages accordingly. This work could include giving tours of the village and murals or managing a merchandise store by the gate.

There are also opportunities for residents to connect with the surrounding Oakland community. One group of volunteers is currently securing safe transportation plans for the residents: mobilizing the city to get crosswalk lights fixed, getting discounted clipper cards and bus passes, supplying bikes and teaching bike maintenance workshops. A group of doctors is making plans to create a health clinic at the Empowerment Village to serve the residents and other people who live nearby. And once it is safe to go to gyms, the residents will be able to go to the nearby Planet Fitness to work out.

Even as the construction of the THV in Oakland is nearly complete, it is only YSA's first project to build homes for homeless youth in the Bay Area. YSA is currently consulting with a team building housing for homeless students at Cal State University in Hayward. YSA is also in the very beginning stages of building a second tiny house village in the East Bay.

"This is a ball that's rolling," says McCreary, "and it's going to get bigger."

Simone Rotman is an intern at Youth Spirit Artworks.

Alameda County plans to move everyone sheltering in their temporary 'COVID hotels' into longer-term housing

***Hotels** from page 1*

ple with COVID-19 or who have been exposed to others with COVID-19. This program will continue to accept referrals for the foreseeable future.

Funding for Project Roomkey under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act was originally slated to end in September but was extended to December. Meanwhile Alameda County won $14.5 million from California's Project Homekey—another state initiative that sprang up in the face of the pandemic, intended to provide funding for localities to purchase hotels and motels to convert into permanent affordable housing. With this money, Alameda County has purchased the Comfort Inn and Days Hotel in Oakland as longer-term non-congregate shelter for exiting Project Roomkey participants. But as the pandemic continues to rage on, these hotels are insufficient to house all those who remain sick or medically vulnerable.

Abbott explained the importance of finding bridge funding for Project Roomkey.

"We absolutely don't want people who are homeless and COVID-positive to be outside or in a congregate setting," she said. "Operation Comfort provides three meals a day and is an isolation quarantine site."

In the final days of January 2021, a number of Project Roomkey participants were unaware of the county's plans to continue sheltering them after the motels where they currently reside close down. Some reported being given too little time to decide whether or not they wanted to live in the housing options offered, such as group homes. Many believed they would be put back on the streets on January 31, because the program was scheduled to close.

One of these people was Raphaella Wolf, a current beneficiary of Operation Safer Ground who said she was happy with the program. She likened the size of her room with the San Francisco studio apartment she lived in prior to becoming homeless and appreciates having a refrigerator and microwave.

"The hotel is on Industrial Parkway West, which means there's nothing out here but industrial businesses and trucks….then there's the freeway. It's a food desert," she said. But she added, "The hotel partnered with a restaurant where the restaurant makes meals and drops them off...and you go and pick them up in the office or they deliver it to your door. So that's been great."

Unfortunately, everyone would soon have to leave the hotel. "As of now, I have nowhere to go except to my tent at the homeless encampment." But late on January 26, she said, "I don't have to leave the motel I am currently in on January 31st, but where and when I am going to be housed by Alameda County after that isn't decided."

The people exiting Project Roomkey are being moved to a variety of locations. The Days Hotel and Comfort Inn offer 240 rooms of permanent supportive housing (PSH), non-congregate housing that offers additional social services to its residents. Separately, the City of Oakland has obtained 163 "deeply affordable" housing units, consisting of 110 units under Bay Area Community Services (BACS), 42 units at Clifton Hall, and 21 units at the Inn at Temescal.

The County will also rely on subsidized housing in the private market. Using their Pathways to Housing program, the County will help subsidize rental costs. Formerly homeless renters contribute 30 percent of their income to the cost of the rent, and the program provides the balance. Though the Pathways program has succeeded in housing a number of formerly homeless people in Alameda County, negative stereotypes surrounding homelessness does make some landlords hesitant to participate in the program. Advocates have also criticized the type of housing that is made available to participants in the program, and the efficacy of the program as a whole.

'Housing isn't just a human right, [it's] a public health intervention'

In the longer term, Alameda County intends to rely on its "Home Together Plan"—completed in late August 2020—which envisions eliminating homelessness in Alameda County over a five-year period using a broad array of interventions as part of a comprehensive approach. Though the plan is expensive, Abbott explained that it would save money in the long run because preventing homelessness costs much less than helping people escape homelessness.

She explained that the ongoing housing subsidy could end up costing $30,000 a year per household, so you end up saving money by keeping people from entering homelessness in the first plcae by spending the $4,000 per household.

Homelessness advocate Needa Bee, who is herself unhoused, said she is impressed with Alameda's assistance to people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic and their openness to feedback. Still, she says, they could do more.

"When people were like, 'We don't like the way these programs are being run,' Alameda County made some adaptations," said Bee. She added, "The response has shown how housing isn't just a human right, but a public health intervention. And it's totally sad that it took a pandemic for bureaucrats to actually understand that when we've been saying this for years."

Bee hopes temporary shelter with support services connected to the possibility of permanent housing should continue, adding, "We should be looking beyond the pandemic; rather than asking, 'How are we going to house people during a pandemic?' we should be asking, 'How are we going to house these people, period.'"

While some advocates are wary about the county's ability to house so many people so quickly, Abbott remains optimistic about the future of the county's programs, pointing out that President Biden just signed an order to provide additional assistance for non-congregate shelter costs.

"Our deep commitment is to make sure that we don't have to exit people to the street," Abbott said. "And my ideal would be that we can also start taking people directly from the street into these housing options. That would be amazing."



Thomas Brouns

The Inn at Temescal is one of several local hotels under renovation for the Homekey program.

Thomas Brouns is a documentary filmmaker and student at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. He has served four overseas tours as an American diplomat and is a retired U.S. Army officer.

Do you want to be published in Street Spirit?

If you are interested in contributing to Street Spirit, please email us at streetspiritnews@gmail.com.

We prioritize contributions from currently and formerly homeless people.

We pay contributors.

What's that book Street Spirit vendors are selling?

Buy a copy of *Eastern Span* from a *Street Spirit* vendor for a sliding-scale price of $5-$20

By Alastair Boone

In July 2019, Rick Paulas generously donated hundreds of copies of his book, *Eastern Span*, for *Street Spirit* vendors to sell along with their papers. That experiment was a success—some vendors earned hundreds of extra dollars during the months they were selling his novel. Because of this success, he donated an additional 775 books for our vendors to sell in the coming months. All proceeds from these novels will go directly into the vendor's pocket. Buy one from your newspaper vendor for a sliding-scale price of $5-$20.

I could describe *Eastern Span* in two ways. I could tell you that it is a noir novel set in 2013-14 Oakland, about a gig-economy sleuth named Pug on a meandering hunt to find a friend who has mysteriously disappeared. Along the way, he stumbles upon a housing conspiracy wrought by the kind of evil developers that we all suspect exist, but have never actually seen in the light of day.

I could also tell you that it is a portrait of Oakland, frozen in time. Pug drinks at the city's classic dives, like Ruby Room and The Avenue. He parties at underground house shows at Fallout Shelter. He visits long-standing homeless encampments, such as Here/There. And he watches as houses are knocked to the ground, scaffolding is erected, and neighborhoods are devastated by gentrification.

Readers who are familiar with Oakland can breathe in a scene that feels like home. Readers who are not can get a taste of the city through the author Rick Paulas' vivid descriptions, such as "the massive white harbor cranes loom[ing] in the background like pallbearers waiting for their cue."

Both descriptions would be true.

> *'Whenever I wrote about homeless folks, I always have a squishy bit of guilt...This is just a way I could pay back a little'*

Rick Paulas was born in Oak Forest, Illinois—a suburb near Chicago. He lived in Oakland for six years before moving to New York City in June. While living in Oakland he worked as a freelance journalist who wrote about the city around him. Often, he notes, this led him to stories about the housing crisis. "That's really THE story of the Bay right now," he told *Street Spirit*.

Eastern Span is Paulas' debut novel. It is being distributed by people who sell *Street Spirit* in the East Bay, and those who sell Street Sheet in San Francisco. Why? We spoke to Paulas to find out. (Our conversation has been edited and condensed.)

Alastair Boone: I read on Twitter that having *Eastern Span* distributed by street vendors has been a dream of yours since before you finished writing the novel. Why?

Rick Paulas: Whenever I write about homeless folks or encampments, I always have a squishy bit of guilt, in that I'm literally making money off of them—just freelance rates, but still— while they're still sleeping outside. Maybe it's Catholic guilt. Anyway, this was just a way I could pay back a little.

That said, I wouldn't say this is entirely altruistic. I want people I don't know to read this, and that means distribution that reaches behind my social sphere. Others use the publishing industry, but working hard to convince people they can make a buck off of you isn't super compelling to me for this project. With those two goals, this just felt logical.

Oh, also: As far as I'm concerned there is no better source of news than street papers. No economic incentive by advertisers to deal with, a completely underrepresented group of writers and journalists, and a perspective you can't get anywhere else. What else is good writing or journalism supposed to be?

***Eastern Span** continues on page 10*

The 'secret homeless'

FIRST-PERSON

By Ace Backwords

Generally I like to think of myself as the "secret homeless." Someone that doesn't look or act homeless. And you would walk right by me and never guess I was homeless. Because I look normal just like YOU. You abnormal fucks.

But I guess not tonight. Probably because I'm sitting on cardboard matting. And am wearing a heavy overcoat. And I'm wearing a ski-knit hat (classic homeless bum look).

So these three young women that have been hanging out in the patio across from me suddenly approach me. And they're bearing a bag of to-go food. As an offering to me. So I immediately can tell what the scenario is. These kindly do-gooders with their hearts in the right place want to offer this poor pathetic homeless bum some food.

Which is nice. I appreciate the gesture. But I'm already 20 pounds overweight. And I don't need the extra food.

"You like?" says one of the women offering me the food.

"No. No. I'm fine," I said. "I'm just sitting here charging my cell phone. But thank you very much."

"We're from France," said the woman. "Don't understand English."

"Oh," I said. "Thank you thank you. But no. No. I'm good." I'm trying to simplify my communication.

"Oh oh," she says.

"But thank you, thank you," I said. "Gracious." (I don't know any French but figured they'd know that one). "

They smiled and started to leave.

"Ciao," I said. Is that French? Close enough. They smiled and headed off.

Ha ha.

Ace Backwords is a homeless writer and artist who lives in Berkeley, California. You can find more writing on his blog, acidheroes.wordpress.com.

East Bay Advisory

FENTANYL WARNING



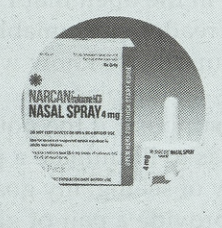
Increase in Fentanyl being found in Stimulants in East Bay

Due to a recent uptick in fentanyl use and fentanyl in stimulants, we are seeing more instances of folks overdosing who are using drugs.

2020 has hit our community hard, especially our unhoused brothers and sisters and folks who use drugs. In the recent months, we have seen an uptick in fentanyl being found in stimulants. This means folks who are using stimulants OR opioids are all at risk of overdose. Please see the signs and symptoms below for an opioid overdose:



Test Your Supply
Best way to keep yourself safe is by testing your supply.



ALWAYS Have Narcan Handy
Make sure when you use, someone knows where the Narcan is and how to use it.



Don't Use Alone!
If you can, always try and use with someone. If you are using together, take turns! Always start low and go slow.

For access to Fentanyl Test Strips and Narcan: Please contact Michaella Jones with HEPPAC at 510-394-2552 or mjones@casasegura.org

Graphic by Michaella Jones/HEPPAC

'I want readers in [the Bay] to become more interested in their own local city'



Travis Tarr

One of the drawings Rick commissioned for *Eastern Span*.

Eastern Span *from page 9*

AB: What inspired you to write *Eastern Span*?

RP: Mainly, two big events happened at the end of 2016: Trump and the Ghost Ship fire. They seem like distinctly separate things, and largely are, but to me they were entwined within some of the same systems—Trump's career as a blowhard real estate mogul who spent his career seeking ways to raise property values, often by kicking out poor minorities. The lack of artistic, "free" spaces left in the Bay due to landlords raising their property values by converting to lofts left Ghost Ship as one of the few gathering places left.

Beyond those, I've been reporting on homeless evictions—for publications, or just for Twitter sometimes—and simply living in the ether of friends having to move out of town because they can't afford it. Once I figured out I wanted to write about the effects of the commodification of property, I wanted to trick people into reading it, hence, the noir plot.

AB: Your book really grounds the reader in Oakland. Oftentimes, it grounds the reader in Oakland's homeless encampments. How come encampments are so central to the geography of Eastern Span? Why not just focus on house shows or squats to convey the underground scene?

RP: *As far as I can tell, it's all* interconnected. The system that's pushed artists into underground spaces and squats is the same one that's evicted (often minority) low-income tenants from their homes is the same one that answers the complaints of property owners by evicting mutual-aid encampments without giving them anywhere else to go. The encampments, particularly "Here/There," are so out in the open that I felt it'd give the reader, presumably local, more grounding to know where the action was taking place.

I suppose, if the point of any writing is to illuminate a perspective or way of seeing, my goal with this was to provide a pair of glasses readers could hold up as they viewed the city. I'd love for someone to be reading this on the BART, look out the window, and see a building or area or one of those shipping cranes I was trying to describe.

AB: Given the prevalence of encampments in your novel, the word "homeless" does not appear very often. Is there a reason for this?

RP: I wanted to present people as people, not as part of a category, which inherently comes with preconceptions of how they got that designation. I suppose that's why I stayed away from the term for the most part.

AB: There is hand-drawn artwork throughout the novel. Who did you commission to make the art?

RP: Most were friends or Twitter contacts, and again, it was an attempt to get people to pick up the damn book. It seems like a book with illustrations would sell better than some random book? But also, I like working with people. It's lonely out there as a freelancer! And inspiring your friends to dig into their artistic side and help out with your project is basically the dream, isn't it?

AB: One of my favorite things about *Eastern Span* is how it describes the many geographies of Oakland. Lots of the places remain local fixtures—like The Alley. Some are ghosts of the past, like Esther's Orbit Room. And then some are places that are constantly changing and evolving, like the Here/There encampment, the Albany Bulb, the unnamed cocktail bar undergoing renovations, and the many unnamed encampments that crop up and have surely disappeared. To me, this helps the book feel alive, like it's living and breathing. In your mind, how do all these overlapping worlds contribute to the Oakland that is presented in *Eastern Span*?

RP: I don't know that there's a single setting in the book I didn't see with my own eyes, even if that place is under a pseudonym in the book. The plot machinations of the book are obviously fiction, but I don't know a single description of a person or place that I made up. Obviously, the effect of that quasi-journalistic approach captures details of a single moment in time, which again was the point. The cocktail bars undergoing renovations are now staffed and open, the encampments have been pushed to wherever they are next. This was 2013-2014, and whatever stage of gentrification that was. We are now living half a decade past that.

Okay, so why did I decide to write it that way? Over the past few years, I've really come to get obsessed with the study of economic geography, essentially how capitalistic forces and investment shapes our geographic landscape. Like, why artists are known as "the shock troops of gentrification," how red-lining disinvestment works, why BART decided to plow through a low-income African-American community to build its rail line, and which in turn, killed the Seventh Street jazz scene represented by Esther's. That kinda stuff.

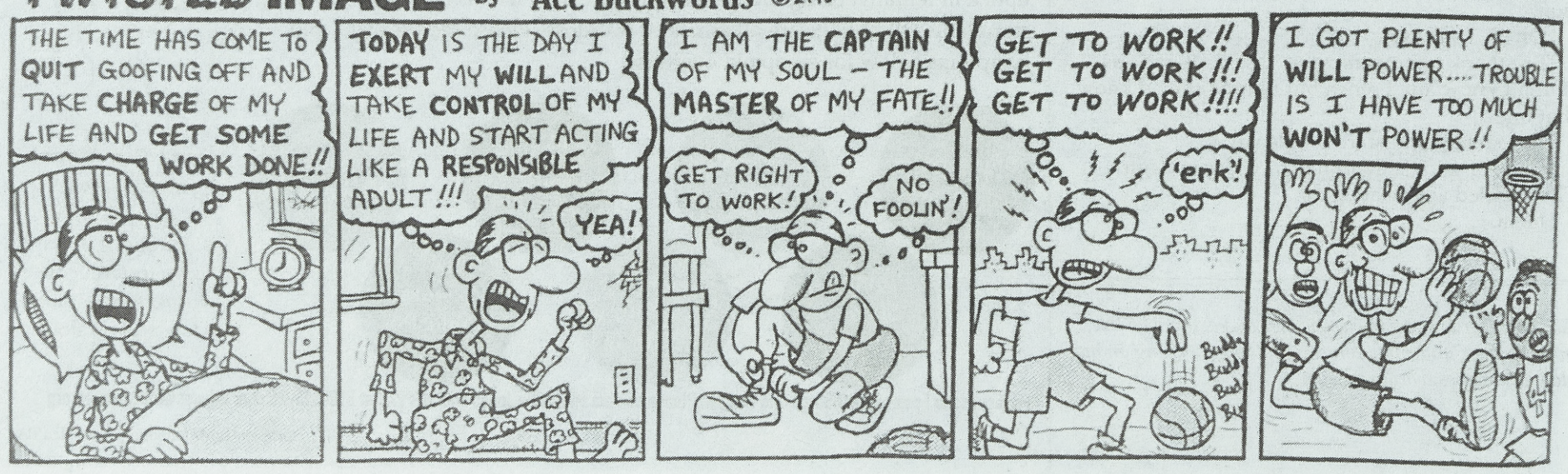
For a wide variety of reasons, the Bay seems like ground zero for that kind of examination now, what with the various municipalities jockeying for supremacy while the world's investment floods into the area via tech capital. So, to capture some of that, I really, desperately wanted to get the geographical details right.

AB: What do you hope readers will take away from your novel about Oakland? What do you hope they will take away about homelessness in Oakland?

RP: I want readers in Oakland (and the Bay, and all over the country really), to become more interested in their own local city. So much of the media now is dominated by whatever New York determines is "news," or by Trump just sucking up all of the bandwidth, that people tend to overlook what's happening in their own damned backyard now. If I could get one person to shift their funds away from supporting *The New York Times* to supporting a local journalist or independent enterprise in the Bay, that'd be a big win for me.

In terms of homelessness, I want the housed to break down their self-imposed barrier when it comes to seeing the houseless. This sense that people so often walk past other people without any kind of acknowledgement, as if living on two planes of existence. A fictional book by some random dude isn't going to erect the supply of public housing that's needed to break this cycle, but maybe it can get some folks to see homeless folks as, you know, people. People that haven't just been lazy, or didn't work hard enough, or are weak because they've allowed a drug addiction to take over. But people that have been subject to a system that, frankly, can be changed. I suppose that would be my hope.

A version of this article originally appeared in the July, 2019 issue of Street Spirit. Alastair Boone is the Editor in Chief of Street Spirit.



Good terminology is necessary for good mental health treatment

COMMENTARY

By Jack Bragen

MENTAL health consumers are rendered impotent in terms of accomplishing things in our lives by verbal and psychological tactics of many professionals in the mental health treatment system. This prevents us from building decent lives for ourselves. This must change. People with mental health disabilities deserve encouragement and empowerment to build lives for ourselves. Being subjected to beliefs imparted and forced on us that we are unable must change.

Mental health consumers like me often do not have a choice concerning our involvement in the mental health treatment system. We need them more than they need us. If you have a serious psychiatric disorder, failing to be helped by doctors can spell disaster, leaving people like me with little choice but to engage with the mental health treatment system.

I am grateful for the help of the mental health treatment system. The current system, and my cooperation with it, are a far cry better than trying to tough things out on my own, or otherwise rebel. However, there are a number of things I would like to see change.

Let me begin with the word, "compliant." The word has a number of negative and stigmatizing connotations, it implies a looming authority of the mental health system, and it insults the mental health consumer by painting us as helpless. I'd like to see that word replaced with "cooperative." The term refers to a person who takes medication and other treatment voluntarily rather than by force or not at all. When we cooperate, the implication is that we are sensible, thoughtful people. When we are "compliant" the association is of a person who has fought and surrendered, or perhaps someone who has knuckled under due to overwhelming force.

We would do well to replace the term "decompensate," as well. This term is used to describe someone who is losing her or his ability to maintain their mental health. This term is generally used in a derogatory manner. A better term would be something like "become ill," or "become acutely ill." This word by itself is insulting. Just as some words used by racists are intrinsically insulting, I believe "decompensate" is insulting. And coupled with how treatment practitioners usually say it, it is like an obscenity. When I've heard the word spoken, the vocal tone is always insulting and demeaning.

The word "client" or "mental health client" needs to change, too. We are not clients of an advertising company trying to market a product. Therefore, when the word is used to refer to us, it feels like a mockery. "Patient" was the first word that was used and was replaced with the word "client" numerous decades ago. It has to go. The term "mental health consumer" is far better. It implies that a person has consciousness.



Ava Blu

In the mental health treatment system, the word "inappropriate" evokes shame, and it implies that we are antisocial. The word in mainstream society may not seem like that. However, when the word "inappropriate" is used to describe a behavior of a mental health consumer, it implies someone akin to a dog that is not properly socialized. That's the best way I can describe this. Sentences containing the word, "inappropriate" should be overhauled and rephrased.

For example, if a mental health consumer, while in session had an angry outburst toward a staff member, or said something insulting, or interrupted, these could be labeled "inappropriate." A better alternative would be to say something like, "Please be considerate of others."

This revision is very direct and gets the point across, and it does this without invalidating the consumer.

Language, when weaponized, can do damage to people's self-worth, it can create needless resentment, and it can otherwise do harm. When we try to pin down a practitioner on something that hurt, that was offensive or was wrong, in my experience, the practitioner invariably uses language as a shield so as not to be held accountable.

When many people, not just mental health consumers, become upset by something, it is often hard for us to substantiate the specifics of why we feel that way. Being medicated adds additional difficulty in articulating where an upset emotion has its origin. Therefore, when a therapist uses the certain words and phrases, such as the ones I have described, the consumer comes to feel powerless. This is convenient for managing consumers. Therapists and treatment practitioners often want to keep the consumers down for the sake of their jobs being easier. Rendering verbal and emotive impotence assists in this effort.

Psychotherapists also have the skill to psychologically disassemble a consumer. This is accomplished through a series of questions that analyze things like, "When did you first feel this way?" "What, in your past, might have led to this feeling?" "How did you feel when [blank]?" or "What were your thoughts at the time?" The direction of conversation is under the control of the therapist because they manage to ask questions quickly enough that the client remains tasked, preventing them from having the mental wherewithal to object. Thus, twenty minutes later, their mind is in pieces, under a microscope, nothing has been resolved, and the consumer is much worse off than before.

An analogy to the above: A surgeon starts on an operation to take out a person's bad appendix. However, the surgeon doesn't finish the job—instead, they have left the patient on the operating table, with an open incision and with organs not fully put back into place. The patient is released in that condition because the one-hour session has expired, and the surgeon must move on to the next patient.

Words, when weaponized, can do a great deal of damage. And this happens in the mental health treatment system.

Jack Bragen is a writer who lives in Martinez with his wife, Joanna. His books are available for purchase on Amazon.

'The pandemic has reinforced the personhood of people on the street'

***In Dialogue** from page 5*

friends and not worry about reaching out their arms and not being able to touch, to know that they're six feet apart. And so that's tough. People like to visit in their tents if they're living in an encampment or they like to visit in common areas in shelters if they're living in a shelter, and they can't right now. And people are losing patience with that. But we just have to keep it up for 6 months or so. I would estimate that by the end of the summer we will have that behind us. But what [the vaccine] will mean [in the short term] is that you're not going to die from the virus and you're not going to go to the hospital from it.

AB: So the individual doesn't have to worry quite so much about their own heath, but they do still need to worry about people around them who haven't been vaccinated?

Dr. A: That's right.

AB: What if you've already had COVID—same thing?

Dr. A: Um, probably. Although we're still struggling to master what natural immunity means. We haven't really pinpointed how long it lasts and how comprehensive it is.

AB: Do you think the coronavirus pandemic has shed any new light on the meaning of housing as healthcare, or changed the discussion around the subject?

Dr. A: You know the National Academy of Medicine decided two years ago that there wasn't enough evidence to support that notion that housing is healthcare. But I think that we're going to find that evidence in the pandemic. I think that Operation Safer Ground is that proof of concept. To take the people who were most likely to die from COVID-19 away from transmission risk to the greatest extent that we could, transmission risk was much much lower. We have not had a death from COVID at Operation Safer Ground. So I think pretty soon that will become an accepted equation. that housing equals healthcare.

AB: In general, it seems like the pandemic has changed the way a lot of people view the solution to homelessness, and created a lot more political will to do things that were kind of stuck in the gears before. In your mind, how has COVID changed the way we view the solution to homelessness?

Dr. A: I think in part it's housing as healthcare. But in part it's also that [the pandemic] has reinforced the personhood of people on the street, because they are now people that deserve the same level of protection as anybody else does from this scourge. So if you're going to protect them from this virus then oh, maybe we should be offering them the same level of social protection that we offer other members of our society. I do think that some good may come of this in terms of narrowing the chasm of attention and care that different populations get.

AB: Any advice for volunteers or people who want to drop off supplies at encampments, how should you change your behavior during this unprecedented spike in COVID cases?

Dr. A: I think that our outreach partners have developed a set of protocols and sort of an understanding about how to do this in the safest way. They have really thought through it and they've created these protocols with their clients. So my preference would be that people support the community-based organizations that do the work that they want done. For example, if they want more distribution of blankets, then rather than buying a lot of blankets and dropping them off at an encampment, I think finding a community based organization that is doing that and supporting them to do it is a much safer alternative at this moment in history. Not that it should quench their thirst for helping their neighbors, they should just make sure that they are only drinking from their own cup.

In Dialogue is a recurring column in which Street Spirit speaks with community leaders. Alastair Boone is the Editor in Chief of Street Spirit.



USA—President Biden orders 100 percent federal reimbursement for Covid homeless hotels

The Shelter-in-Place hotels that have been housing thousands of unhoused people in the Bay Area since April because of the coronavirus pandemic now stand to be 100 percent funded by the federal government, *Mission Local* reports.

In late January, President Biden directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to completely reimburse cities and states for the emergency services they set up during the pandemic. That includes the thousands of shelter-in-place hotel rooms in the Bay Area.

City officials are left to parse the memorandum and to figure out whether the decision is retroactive, which is not yet certain. According to federal officials, the president was authorized to initiate this move without congressional approval via the Stafford Act.

Bay Area, CA: BART to increase unarmed crisis staff as part of "progressive police bureau"

BART Police have announced a new plan to increase the number of crisis intervention specialists at stations throughout their system, *ABC7* reports. The plan is an expansion of a program first announced last year under the newly formed Progressive Policing and Community Engagement Bureau.

In total, BART Police plan to employ 20 crisis intervention specialists along with 10 other unarmed police ambassadors. The bureau will also include 10 sworn officers. The teams will consist of two crisis specialists and one sworn officer, spread across five different stations in two shifts.

Austin, TX: Austin will use money from police budget for supportive housing

At the end of January, the Austin City Council voted to purchase one hotel and turn it into 60 units of permanent supportive housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness, *The Appeal* reports. The vote to purchase a second hotel was postponed but will be held soon.

Under the measure, the city will spend approximately $6.7 million from its Housing and Planning Department's general obligation bonds to acquire one hotel and use some money from a recurring $6.5 million fund taken from the police department's budget to provide services to the residents of the hotel. At full occupancy (which wouldn't happen this year), services and operating costs for the hotel are expected to be about $1.6 million annually.

Santa Rosa, CA: human rights panel condemns homeless camp sweeps

In January, the Sonoma County Commission on Human Rights denounced the City of Santa Rosa's treatment of homeless people camping on public property, citing a recent sweep on of an encampment before which the City gave no more than a few day's notice to encampment residents, *The Press Democrat* reports.

The commission's meeting followed Santa Rosa's action to disband an encampment of at least 20 people living along the Prince Memorial Greenway just before temperatures plunged below freezing.

Though local shelters are starting to resume intake, they are operating at limited capacity due to the coronavirus pandemic. Santa Rosa is required to provide adequate notice as well as offer shelter and storage options to people camping illegally on public property.

In San Francisco, a non-police response to homelessness is in sight

COMMENTARY

By Stella Kunkat

ON January 19, San Francisco's Compassionate Alternative Response Team (CART) working group presented its plan to end the law enforcement response to homelessness and to roll out a new community-run response team.

"What kind of city would be possible if unhoused neighbors were treated as worthy of life and dignity rather than as a nuisance or a threat?" This is the fundamental question driving the CART working group's mission to replace the police as first responders to situations involving unhoused members of the community. Instead of police, the group is calling for the staffing of well-trained and well-paid peers with lived experience of homelessness.

In this city, there is a longstanding pattern of police as the primary responders to homelessness-related and most often complaint-based 911 calls leading to problematic, harmful, and, yes, even deadly encounters between unhoused members of the community and police officers. For years, advocates with the Coalition on Homelessness and many other organizations have observed the long-term harm and trauma inflicted on unhoused individuals because of such encounters.

In January 2019–notably before the national calling of "defund the police"–the San Francisco Police Commission passed a resolution that called for an end to police response to homelessness and for the Board of Supervisors to create a stakeholders' group to develop an alternative. Under the leadership of Police Commissioner John Hamasaki, the first meetings were organized in February 2020 with the goal to design an inclusive process with community members, key city departments and elected officials at the table. Staff from the offices of four supervisors who have high numbers of unhoused residents in their districts were invited, and as an initial step the Board of Supervisors secured $2 million in reserve for this future program.

When the pandemic hit, the process was sidelined for a few months but then reinitiated in July 2020. The Coalition on Homelessness hired Patrick Brown, senior consultant at The Justice Collective, to facilitate the process. A large group of stakeholders–including the participating members of 28 community organizations, city departments, elected officials, unhoused constituents, and academics–was convened. The goal of this working group was to develop a concrete plan for the implementation of a new form of community response to homelessness. In short, an alternative to police, not a form of alternative policing.

The group decided that the new model would be called Compassionate Alternative Response Team: C.A.R.T.

The working group met weekly for seven months and conducted almost 100 surveys with unhoused individuals, gathering their input on what an alternative to police response should look like. Furthermore, the group was in frequent contact with existing community response programs in the U.S., in particular with the CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) program from Eugene, Oregon. Based on that exchange, the CART working group identified a number of best practices of how to run a community-based response team.

By the end of the seven months, the CART working group had finalized a 70-page report outlining a new "Community Plan for San Francisco."

The CART street survey

As mentioned, close to 100 unhoused individuals were surveyed as part of the development of the CART plan, and personally I had the pleasure to analyze all the responses with a group of volunteers. The respondents ranged from ages 18 to 67 and were interviewed in seven districts throughout the city. The survey questions were designed to elicit a variety of responses regarding what a non-police response should entail. For example, people were asked hypothetical questions about how merchants' complaints about people resting outside should be addressed and how they would like to see conflicts rising from heated arguments among peers and neighbors resolved.

Reading and analyzing all the responses was truly insightful. First of all, the majority of the people that were surveyed had lots of ideas and many detailed recommendations of what an alternative should look like, who should be staffed, and what skills and services the response should have. On the other hand, there were quite a few individuals who, while not necessarily having a clear vision of what an alternative could be like, definitely shared much about the shortcomings of the current police response. For example: "Police should have been more understanding," one respondent said. "Police should have been respectful. They don't respect us and make our situation worse often times." Another said they wished "not (to) be interrupted or disrespected by [the police]; not have [their] life threatened by them."

When asked what they would consider a positive outcome from an encounter with an alternative response team, responses ranged from providing housing, food and other services to offering medical and mental health assistance to simply avoiding arrest. In short, they were open to any option that wasn't punitive, criminalizing or shaming.

Essentially, rather than being met with an assumption-based, stigmatizing attitude, respondents expressed a desire for humane treatment and respect from an alternative response team, without force and aggression, but still with a good understanding of the traumas of homelessness. In addition, they said the team must be staffed by people with lived experience and are familiar with the community they serve. Finally, the survey participants expressed that the team should be well equipped with resources to offer, such as housing, shelter, food, hygiene, medical assistance, harm reduction services, and transportation, so that they could be helped in a drug, psychiatric or (minor) medical crisis.

On the road to implementation

Getting the CART program implemented will undoubtedly be a heavy lift, as it would revolutionize how San Francisco deals with street homlessness. At this stage, the Community Plan has been published, and the process of gaining widespread support for the implementation has been kicked off. The CART working group has met with the Mayor's Steering Committee working on alternatives to policing and hopes to keep collaborating with that committee. On a daily basis, San Franciscans are contacting the CART working group, complimenting the cause and expressing their wish to volunteer and support CART. But support for this would have to come from all stakeholders.

With the support of Police Commissioner John Hamasaki and Supervisor Matt Haney–who is the new chair of the Budget Committee–the CART plan has one foot in the door to success. However, there are still major challenges to implementing CART: Winning broad public support, securing the proposed total annual budget of $6.825 million funded from additional cuts to the police budget, and initiating the program by May 2021.

And even once the budget is secured and implementation is underway, the continued struggle to ensure accountability and avert corruption will continue. Making sure CART responds to the needs of unhoused individuals will demand ongoing involvement from all constituents and stakeholders. In short, the long-term commitment and scrutiny of advocates and community organizations will be paramount to CART's success.

Visit the CART-SF website for more information: www.cartsf.org/home

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A version of this story was originally published in Street Sheet, San Francisco's street newspaper. Stella Kunkat is currently working for the CART SF project and interning with the Human Rights Work Group at the Coalition on Homelessness.